The writer while on a trip to Frio canyon in 19..

# Capt. John F. Tom

## A BIOGRAPHY

Compiled By

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YALE

F.W. & C.S. Beinecke Fund for Western Americana

The writer while on a trip to Frio canyon in 1[illegible] had the pleasure of spending a few hours with the old Veteran Captain John F. Tom, one of the few survivors of the famous battle of San Jacinto. Captain Tom has a beautiful home in the Frio Valley a few miles above the town of Leakey, where he is spending the evening of life in quiet and peace, surrounded by a pleasant family and genial neighbors. He was born in Maury county, middle Tennessee, in 1818. His father William Tom was a soldier under Gen. Andrew Jackson in the war with the Indians, and was present at the famous battle of Horseshoe Bend. His uncle John Files, on his mother's side, was a soldier under General Jackson in the British war of 1812, and was killed at the battle of New Orleans on the 8th of January, 1815. His great-grandfather was killed by the tories in South Carolina during the Revolutionary war of 1776.

Captain Tom came to Texas with his father in 1835, landing at the mouth of the Brazos river in February. Quite a lot of people came to Texas in those days who were refugees from justice and bore bad characters generally. Mr. William Tom brought with him the following recommendations of good character and citizenship, which were shown the writer and allowed to be copied:

"State of Tennessee, Maury county, November 15th, 1834. Whereas William Tom, a citizen of the state of Tennessee and county of Maury, is about to remove from here to the province of Texas with his family, consisting of the following members: his wife, Kissiah, his oldest son John, second Charles, third Alfred, fourth James, fifth a daughter named Sarah, these being children of his first wife, Mary Files; Hughes Caroline, and William, children of his second and present wife, Kissiah.

And whereas, we whose names are assigned below, being citizens of the state and county aforemen-

tioned, and being neighbors and acquaintances of said William Tom, and some of us knowing him as a citizen for the most part of twenty years, do hereby certify said William Tom is an orderly citizen of honest character and industrious habits, and that the above respecting his family and all herein mentioned is correct.

| | |
|---|---|
| Samuel Whiteside | Samuel Lusk |
| Eli Asken | James Lusk |
| James Lusk | Samuel Johnes |
| James Carthy | J. C. Aydetalatt |
| John Prewitt | Robert L. Brown |
| Thomas Kindrick | Dudley A. Lobeston |
| W. J. Young | Pen Gill |
| Robertson Whitehead | William Gounett |
| Michael Higgin | Gideon Strickland |
| Joseph Tom | Wm. C. Malone |
| Frances Bell | Jonathan Talle |
| B. Erwin | S. Whiteside |
| John Kingston | Isaac O. Whiteside |
| James Lessoms | Milton Whiteside |
| Henry Higgins | John Eddring |
| Archibald Brown | George W. Sessums |
| William Brown | Jourdon Thompson |
| John Neilser | Daniel Neilser. |

Following this is a certificate of County Clerk, Thomas J. Porter and Justice of the Peace Alexander Corthey, of good character, etc. Also the following from the Governor of the state, showing that these certificates were by proper authority.

State of Tennessee, Executive Department. I, William Carroll, Governor in and over the said State, do hereby certify that Thomas J. Porter, whose signature is annexed to the foregoing certificate is now and was on the day of the date thereof the clerk of the court of pleas, and quarter sessions for the county of Maury, in the said state, and that his official acts as



such are entitled to full faith and credit, and that said certificate is in due form of law. In testimony thereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the great seal of the state to be affixed, at Nashville, the 22nd day of December, 1834. By the Governor, "William Carroll." "Samuel G. Smith, Secretary."

This is rather a unique document, and I do not suppose there is another of the same character in the state of Texas. It is carefully preserved and highly prized by the Tom family, as it should be.

In the summer of 1835 the Tom family were living in Washington county, where they settled after leaving the mouth of the Brazos. In the fall of the same year the Mexicans came to Gonzales, on the Guadalupe river, which place had been settled by Gen. DeWitt's colony, and demanded a small cannon which had been furnished to the settlers by the Mexican government for their defense against Indian attacks. The Texans refused to give up the cannon, and a fight ensued in which the Mexicans were defeated and they went back to San Antonio, from which place they came, without accomplishing their mission.

Gen. Stephen F. Austin, who was called the father of Texas, then raised a small army and proceeded to San Antonio, where General Cos was in command of the Mexican forces. William Tom and his son John, the subject of this sketch, joined Austin's command and went out to San Antonio to fight Cos and his army. They participated in the battles of Mission, Conception and the Grass Fight, and then father and son joined the artillery under Colonel Neill, who was an old comrade of the elder Tom in the Creek war under General Jackson.

Some ditching was done and cannon planted within 600 yards of the Alamo and fire opened upon it, but the pieces were too light and no impression was made upon it. When the Mexicans opened fire on their

position, the Texans lay low and avoided their shots, and when night came they retired to the old mill at the head of the river. This demonstration against the fort of the Alamo was to draw the attention of the Mexicans from Colonel Ben Milam, who was entering the city with about 300 men west of the river. After some terrible fighting the city was taken and Cos and his men surrendered. Before this was accomplished however, the brave Milam lost his life, with many others who followed him.

After the capture of the city William Tom and his son returned home, and in March, 1836, John joined the army under Gen. Sam Houston on the Colorado. On the release of Gen. Cos and his men they went back to Mexico, and President Santa Anna, who was brother-in-law to Cos, at once invaded Texas with a large army and recaptured San Antonio and stormed the Alamo, which was garrisoned by less than 200 men under Col. William B. Travis, all of whom perished, fighting to the last. Col. Fannin and his men met a like fate at Goliad, and none now were left of the defenders of Texas except the small army that had assembled under General Houston.

When John Tom, then a youth of 17 years, announced that he was going to join the army of General Houston his mother tried to keep him from going on account of his tender years and as an argument stated that he had worn out his socks in the previous campaign, and that he could not go until she knit some more. A neighbor girl was present and heard the remark, retired, pulled off her stockings, presented them to John, requested that he wear them to the army. He put them on and then a pair of buckskin moccasins, mounted his horse, bid farewell to all and set out to find the retreating army of Houston. He joined the company of Capt. W. W. Hill; but when the battle of San Jacinto came off the Captain was sick and the men were led into the



fight by Bob Stephenson. After crossing the Brazos Houston got between the division of Santa Anna and that led by Filisola, crossed Vinces bridge close upon the heels of Santa Anna and went into camp in the timber on Buffalo Bayou just above where it enters the San Jacinto river. Santa Anna had crossed Vinces Bayou with about 1500 men, but was that night joined by the treacherous Cos with 500 more. He had violated his parole granted him after the surrender at San Antonio and returned with the invading army of the Mexican president. To oppose this force, Houston had 732 men. The Mexicans were in an entrenched camp on the prairie three quarters of a mile south of the Texans.

General Houston seemed to be in no hurry to bring on the battle. He sat quietly and calmly in his tent until 4 o'clock on the evening of the 21st of April, in the meantime, however, he had sent Deaf Smith, his trusty scout, and one other to cut down the bridge across Vinces Bayou which was the only outlet of escape for a defeated army. When the general thought that ample time had elapsed for this to be accomplished he ordered the twenty-two Captains who commanded the companies present to come before him. There was a great stir in the patriot camp when the men saw their Captains assemble and the horse of their General saddled in front of his tent. He came out with his sword buckled around him, and in a few words told the Captains to parade their men in line. When the order was communicated to the respective companies, the men obeyed with alacrity, and soon formed in one rank and quietly extended out into the prairie. General Houston rode down the line and gave his orders, telling the men that he was going to attack the enemy, and for them to move slowly and orderly at first, and not to crowd or pass the two small cannons which were in the center, and which were to be loaded and fired

as they advanced when they came within range of the enemy. One of the guns was commanded by BenMcCulloch, afterwards Confederate General in the Civil war, and who was killed at the battle of Elkhorn. As the men stood in line grasping their guns they presented a strange group of fighting men in individual contrast. Beside the gray-haired Veteran of other wars stood the beardless youth with wide open eyes, throbbing heart and quick short breath, anticipating his first battle. Shoulder to shoulder with the better dressed men from the towns in the east stood the buck-skin clad hunter from the west; the merchant had left his counter and stood by the farmer in line, gun in hand; the doctor had left his office and drugs behind, and was handling a long rifle instead of his pill boxes, with shot pouch and powder horn over his shoulder; the lawyer had quit his briefs and clients, and was parading in line, gun in hand and pistol in belt, with his patent leather boots touching the moccasined foot of the plainsman. All were there with but one object in view, love of liberty; ever uppermost in the true Angelo Saxon breast. The cowards and tories had long since deserted the ranks of Houston, and the men who now stood in line with their faces to the foe were the true patriots and heroes. When the advance was ordered the men started with a firm step and in good order. Burleson's regiment was in the center and Houston was leading it. When they came in view of the Mexicans they noticed them in great confusion, and the cannon soon began to play on the advancing line of the Texans. The twin sisters replied and things began to get lively. The men commenced to double quick and yell and in spite of orders passed the cannons. Ben McCulloch left his loaded on the prairie, for as he went to aim and fire he noticed General Houston himself in front of it. The men in line were all on foot except General Houston. The cavalry, only about 60 in number, were on the extreme



right. The Mexicans sent a plowing fire at the yelling Texans as they came sweeping towards them, and men began to get hit and fall out of line. General Houston shouted his orders for no man to stop to assist a falling friend or comrade, but to press on straight ahead and not to fire until they could see the Mexicans eyes, and to penetrate the Mexican line and fight them hand to hand. The men went to a full running charge, with trailed arms and yelling loudly. Comrades dropped out here and there stricken by the musket balls which were striking among them like hail. John F. Tom, the boy with the moccasins, was in all this wild charge, but was finally hit by a big musket ball and knocked out of line. The men were true to the orders which they had received and pressed on. Two neighbors of the boy gave him a quick glance as he went down with his leg badly shattered but pressed on. The hand to hand fight, pursuit and great slaughter of the Mexican army has been oft told and needs no repetition here. Captain Tom told the writer that he never heard such a noise in his life after he was left behind. He tried several times to raise himself high enough above the tall grass to take a look at things, but soon became very weak from loss of blood and had to be still. Fortunately he fell in what we old Texans called a hog-wallow and it had mud in it which he banked around his wounded leg and helped to stop the flow of blood. It was several hours before the pursuit was over and the boy suffered very much, but finally his two neighbors, Milt Swisher and Louis Clemens, who had noted his fall, came hurriedly to the spot and bore him tenderly in to camp. In removing the stocking from the shattered leg it was noticed that the ball had cut the top of it off. He suffered for a long time and was carried home as soon as possible, where kind and affectionate hands dressed his wound and nursed him until the limb was cured.

In 1846 Captain Tom moved to Guadalupe county, before it was organized, and in 1856 was elected sheriff of the county, which office he held four years, that being the limit in that day and time. In 1862 he moved to Atascosa county, which was then just being settled, and which was on the frontier. The Indians were very hostile and made many raids through this county, and in 1863 Mr. Tom recevied a commission to raise a company of rangers for frontier protection. While acting in this capacity the Indians made a raid and killed some of the people, besides carrying off a lot of stock. Capt. Tom pursued them with his rangers and came upon the hostiles at the head of San Miguel creek, and a fight ensued. Both parties tried to get to a pile of rocks for their protection during the battle, and the Indians beat the rangers to the coveted spot. In the fight which followed the Comanches were defeated with loss. Of the men in the fight only the names of Calvin Turner, Lott Miller, and one of the McCombs boys could be remembered. After the fight the rangers followed the Indians to the Frio waterhole on the divide, but could not again bring them to battle and the pursuit was abandoned.

Alfred Tom, while serving as a ranger on the frontier, was shot in the leg below the knee with an arrow which was at once pulled out and thrown down, but the wound would not heal and after two years he told his brother John one day to cut into the wound and see what was the cause. He did so and found a part of the iron spike still in the wound. It was taken out and then the wound healed. The Tom's men were fine frontiersmen and always ready to go and fight the enemies of Texas. In the Calhoun expedition to Mexico in 1855, to chastise the Kickapoo Indians for a raid into Gaudalupe county, in which several people were killed, Hughes Tom, George Tom, William Tom and probably some others of the family accompanied the expedition.



YALE

In the terrible fight on the San Fernando road, in which Calhoun's men were almost overwhelmed by a superior force of Mexicans and Indians, some daring feats were performed. When young Estus Benton fell from his horse shot, in the head, during the charge through the enemy, in order to reach a ravine, Captain Benton, who was also wounded, missed his son and would have gone back in an efort to rescue the body had he not been prevented. Then Hughes Tom, F. L. Hicks and Wesley Harris went back under heavy fire and brought young Benton to the ravine. When Calhoun retreated and burnt the town of Piedras Nagrus Hughes Tom applied the first torch. William Tom afterwards commanded a company of rangers and was stationed on the Sabinal river near where Sabinal station is now on the S. P. R. R.

Capt. John F. Tom was for many years sheriff of Guadalupe county during the frontier days. On one occasion a Kentucky outlaw had escaped jail at San Antonio. Capt. Tom happened to be at his home five miles west of Seguine when he received a message from Captain Henry, the sheriff of Bexar county, advising him of the Kentuckian's escape and the probability that he would call on his relatives at Seguine for assistance to get out of the state. Without a second's delay Cap. Tom saddled a horse and proceeded in a gallop and alone to the designated house, arriving there, and knowing the family well, he entered the premises by the back way, and was not surprised at seeing that a pair of horses had been harnessed to a light vehicle and apparently were waiting for a driver and load. At the back door he met a young man of 25, son of the widowed head of the family. To him he explained the object of the call, and added that he was certain the fugitive he was after was in the house. The young man protested, but did not convince the Captain.

"If you do not produce him my duty as sheriff

will compel me to search the house," said the Capt., after some 10 minutes of wrangling. "Under most any other circumstances I would take your word without hesitation, but now I am sure you are only doing what I would do were I in your place and a relative came to me for assistance." Capt. Tom persisted and finally won his point and began the search of the house. It was a two story house. Having explored the lower story without results Capt. Tom ascended the stairs and commenced exploring the upper story. Every room was open and he critically searched every one of them. One of these rooms was occupied by two young ladies apparently busy reading, one of them sitting in a chair tipped back against a walnut wardrobe. Every inch a gentleman, his task had become so disagreeable that he about decided to abandon the search. He finally decided he would look into the wardrobe. When he conveyed his decision to the young lady she kindly and gently moved her chair away, but he noticed a look of distress flash across her face for a moment, and this convinced the Capt. that he had at last cornered his man. Three minutes later the gallant Capt. Tom changed his mind, however, for prob where he might with the barrel of his pistol, thrust where he might his left arm, and feel as carefully as he could with his left hand and arm he encountered only soft yielding dresses, winter clothing, unused pillows and other like articles usually stored away during summer months. Ready to do his duty at any and all hazards, he was yet quite relieved at finding his search fruitless and closing the wardrobe door he said to the ladies: "Well girls, I am glad he is not here." Just as the door went closed, however, he saw what appeared to be a hanging dress move slightly. Another instant and the Kentuckian had lost his balance and stumbled forward. "Why did you move," exclaimed the young lady. The Kentucky lad had been wounded in the leg in making his escape



from San Antonio. "I just couldn't help it," said he. "This infernal old ankle was giving me hail Columbia—I had to stand on one foot—I was under constant apprehension of being discovered, and betwween uneasiness of mind and physical pain was in such a state that when Capt. Tom said he was glad I was not here I could not help from moving. Besides, I thought when he spoke in that way that he had shut the door." Anyway Sheriff Tom had his man.

Capt. Tom had many similar experiences in his life as sheriff and he was reputed to be a terror to evil doers over all south Texas during his official life.

In 1873 Captain Tom was sent to the Legislature from Atascosa county and made a true and faithful representative for his people. He moved to the Frio Canyon several years ago, and in 1893 had the misfortune to get a leg broken in attempting to dismount from a horse. This coupled with the old Mexican wound compelled him to use crutches.

Captain Tom was made a Mason in 1867, Pleasanton Lodge No. 383.

Editor's Note—The House of Representatives, of which Mr. Tom was an active member for several years, at the time of Mr. Tom's death dedicated a page of the House Journal to his memory as follows:

IN MEMORY OF CAPT. JOHN F. TOM

Mr. Murray of Wilson offered the following resolution:

Whereas, Captain John F. Tom, a veteran of the Battle of San Jacinto, that freed Texas from Mexican tyranny, and who was wounded in said battle, and who was an honored member of the Fourteenth Legislature from Atascosa County, died at his home near Leakey, in Edwards County, Texas, March 26, 1906, at the ripe old age of 87 years, 11 months and 26 days; be it.

Resolved, by the House of Representatives, That we deplore his death, honor his memory as a soldier, citizen and Legislator, and that a page of the House Journal is hereby dedicated to his memory.

The resolution was read a second time and,

Mr. Brown of Wharton moved that it be adopted by a rising vote.

The motion prevailed and the resolution was adopted unanimously.

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